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Konstantinos Gkaleas¹
Ἐρως and Γυμναστική in the Platonic Corpus:
The Quest for the Form of *Καλόν*

The role of Ἐρως in the Platonic dialogues

It has been sufficiently demonstrated by J.-P. Vernant that many divinities in the Greek pantheon were named after psychological functions, mental attitudes, intellectual qualities and above all passions or sentiments.² In this context, the presence of Ἐρως in this specific category of divine entities comes as no surprise. Despite the fact that we could examine a plethora of interesting forms, figures and roles of Ἐρως in the ancient Greek literary tradition,³ in this paper, I focus on the concept of Ἐρως in the Platonic corpus and its relation to the *technē* of γυμναστική.

In fact, Ἐρως seems to be ever-present in Plato's philosophical work, influencing his thought. The two dialogues that discuss this particular notion extensively, however, are the *Symposium* and

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² J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, (Études de psychologie historique, Préface de la 3ème édition [Paris, ed. La Découverte, 1996]), 110.

³ There are undoubtedly many forms of Ἐρως in Greek tradition (cosmogonic Ἐρως, Ἐρως son of Aphrodite etc.) M. Detienne, *Les dieux d'Orphée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 128; M. Detienne, J.-P. Vernant, *Les ruses de l'intelligence (La mètis des Grecs)* (Paris :Flammarion, 1974), 142–44; R. Flacelière, *La vie quotidienne en Grèce au siècle de Périclès*, Librairie Hachette, 1971, Greek trans. G. Vantorou (Athens : Papadimas, 2007), 78; J. N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion*, (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1999), 27; G. Reale, *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone alla luce delle Dottrine non scritte* (Milano: Bompiani, 2010), 463 ; Hesiod, *Theogony*, 195–205; Alcaeus, Fr. 30; Aristophanes, *The Birds*, 36; Orpheus, *Hymn to Aphrodite* (55), 5–9; Parmenides, Fr. 13.

Phaedrus.⁴ A general definition of the concept in Plato ought to include how Ἔρως is depicted as a kind of folly in which the soul pursues the object that is loved,⁵ while desire becomes the driving force of the soul, provoking a sort of movement in order to reach the beloved object.⁶

In *Symposium*, Plato seems to re-approach—in a playful and ironic “tone”⁷—archaic mythological themes related to Ἔρως.⁸ The guests that participate in this literal symposium drink moderately while trying to find a way to praise the divinity Ἔρως.⁹ Briefly, there are six “speeches” which praise Ἔρως, before a completely drunk Alcibiades enters and contributes to the conversation a seventh “speech” that discusses Socrates.¹⁰ The concept of Ἔρως does not represent Platonic thought in the first five speeches of the dialogue, but, when Socrates starts speaking, one can pinpoint the element “that differentiates the philosophical *Erōs* from the common *Erōs* that was glorified by the other guests.”¹¹ This philosophical Ἔρως is not defined as a god, but as a daemon (δαίμων), son of Πενία and Πόρος,¹² an intermediary between gods and mortals.¹³ At some point

⁴ G. Reale, *Per una nuova interpretazione*, 455; L. Brisson, J.-F. Pradeau, *Dictionnaire Platon* (Paris: Ellipses, 2007, 15); J. Marchand, *La pensée grecque*, 2. *Les philosophes et la recherche de la vraie vie : Socrate, Platon, Aristote* (Montreal: Liber, 2008), 203–07.

⁵ Platon, *Phèdre*, ed. L.R. Notice (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002), CXII–CXIV.

⁶ L. Brisson, J.-F. Pradeau, *Dictionnaire Platon*, 15.

⁷ M. Detienne, J.-P. Vernant, *Les ruses*, 142; P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 121.

⁸ M. Detienne, J.-P. Vernant, *Les ruses*, 142.

⁹ L. Brisson, *Platon, Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), 103.

¹⁰ P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels*, 120.

¹¹ J. Marchand, *La pensée grecque*, 2. *Les philosophes et la recherche de la vraie vie: Socrate, Platon, Aristote* (Montreal: Liber, 2008), 202.

¹² M. Detienne, J.-P. Vernant, *Les ruses*, 142.

¹³ Plato, *Symposium*, 202 e.

Socrates refers to the “priestess” Diotima of Mantinea and, to be more specific, he recollects Diotima’s narration of a myth about Ἔρως.¹⁴

Now, as the son of Πόρος and Πενία, Ἔρως is in a peculiar case. First, he is ever poor, and far from tender or beautiful as most suppose him; rather is he hard and parched, shoeless and homeless; on the bare ground always he lies with no bedding, and takes his rest on doorsteps and waysides in the open air; true to his mother’s nature, he ever dwells with want. But he takes after his father in scheming for all that is beautiful and good; for he is brave, strenuous and high-strung, a famous hunter, always weaving some stratagem; desirous and competent of wisdom, throughout life ensuing the truth; a master of jugglery, witchcraft, and artful speech.¹⁵

Ἔρως, “who reigns over the world of becoming,” between the unchanging Forms and matter that is bereft of any form, engages in a quest for real treasures, that is, the ensemble of the Forms.¹⁶ To be more specific, throughout Diotima’s speech we can see praise for the philosophical life, a type of life that is directly associated with contemplation of the Forms, especially the Form of the Beautiful (Καλόν).¹⁷ Hadot suggests that the Ἔρως of the *Symposium*, conceived as a projection of the personality of Socrates himself,¹⁸ constitutes a desire for immortality.¹⁹ It is strongly related to a process composed of several steps which achieves access to the Form of Καλόν as a way of approaching the divine to the greatest extent

¹⁴ P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels*, 123; Marchand also believes that Diotima is some kind of priestess related to the Greek mysteries and the orphism. Despite the fact that we can’t be certain, we’ve chosen to use this title, agreeing at least partially with Marchand’s point of view regarding Diotima’s role. Diotima seems in an abstract way to play a role almost initiatory to the mysteries of Ἔρως always in a philosophical context. J. Marchand, *La pensée grecque*, 204.

¹⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 203c-e.

¹⁶ M. Detienne, J. –P. Vernant, *Les ruses*, 142.

¹⁷ J. Marchand, *La pensée grecque*, 204.

¹⁸ P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituel*, 121.

¹⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 207a.

possible (for a human being, of course).²⁰ Succinctly, Ἔρως can be considered a kind of anagogical power.

The form of Καλόν and corporeal beauty

Plato chooses to associate the philosophical concept of Ἔρως with καλόν instead of with pleasure (ἡδονή). Further, he does not treat Ἔρως in *Philebus*. On the contrary, the two dialogues (*Phaedrus* and *Symposium*) where Plato explores the concept of Ἔρως demonstrate a strong relation between it and beauty, including a connection between ἔρως and corporeal beauty (κάλλος)²¹ which, in its turn, according to the Greek aesthetic criteria, is based to a great degree on the *technē* (skill) of γυμναστική (gymnastic training).²² Indeed, it seems that these specific criteria influence Plato in a substantial way, as we can see in the dialogue *Charmides*.²³ I suggest that there is a strong connection between γυμναστική and the Ἔρως that is the intermediary daemon from *Symposium*. In order to comprehend this connection, I will first put things into perspective by exploring the relation between the Form of Καλόν and physical beauty and by examining the process of the ascension towards that Form. In other words, we have to explicate the steps of ascension

²⁰ Ibid. 210; J. Marchand, *La pensée grecque*, 206 ; G. Reale, *Eros, Dèmon Mediatore, Il gioco delle maschere nel Simposio di Platone* (Milano : Tascabili Bompiani, 2012), 202–221. Interestingly enough, Xenophon's Socrates also mentions Ἔρως in his own *Symposium* distinguishing two types of love. Xenophon says: 'One might conjecture, also, that different types of love come from the different sources, carnal love from the 'Vulgar' Aphrodite, and from the 'Heavenly' spiritual love, love of friendship and of noble conduct,' Xenophon, *Symposium*, VIII, 9-10.

²¹ In general, the term *kallos* refers to a more superficial and ephemeral concept of beauty and is used to in relation to beautiful bodies. See David Konstan, *Beauty: The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), especially chapter 2. In *Symposium* Plato uses *kallos* to refer to the beauty of bodies and souls, but *kalon* to refer to the form of the beautiful.

²² Regarding Greek aesthetic criteria, see H. Taine's excellent theory of the "homme de la palestra," H. Taine, *Philosophie de l'art*, 196.

²³ Plato, *Charmides*, 154b-e.

described by Diotima²⁴ and the anagogic power of Ἔρως. Let us first consider the following passage in *Symposium*:

So when a man by the right method ascends from these particulars and begins to discover that beauty, he is almost able to lay hold of the final secret. Such is the right approach or induction to love-matters. Beginning from obvious beauties he must for the sake of that highest beauty be ever climbing aloft, as on the rungs of a ladder, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; from personal beauty he proceeds to beautiful observances, from observance to beautiful learning, and from learning at last to that particular study which is concerned with the beautiful itself and that alone; so that in the end he comes to know the very essence of beauty.²⁵

As Marchand observes, Plato never seems to deny the significance of the previous steps in this process, despite the fact that they tend to progressively lose their “value.”²⁶ Examining the first steps of this anagogical ladder, to be more precise, the steps that associate with corporeal beauty, a question arises about the definition of Ἔρως. In brief, we could say that a body can be considered beautiful, when it is harmoniously cultivated and its parts are symmetrically arranged.²⁷ A beautiful body can become, then, the point of departure, the first step towards the Καλόν itself.²⁸ It is quite clear in his work that Plato is not after pleasure. The Athenian philosopher is searching for the emotion that corporeal beauty creates in the soul of the lover.²⁹ Through this prism, one could suggest that the true lover, according to Plato, is the one that does not love the beautiful body due to its visible qualities; on the contrary, he is enchanted because such corporeal beauty constitutes the first

²⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, 210 ; G. Reale, *Eros*, 207-21.

²⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 211b-c.

²⁶ J. Marchand, *La pensée grecque*, 206.

²⁷ L. Brisson, J.-F. Pradeau, *Dictionnaire Platon*, 16.

²⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 476c ; *Symposium*, 210a.

²⁹ G. Reale, *Eros*, 207.

vestige of the Form of Καλόν. Plato's Socrates explains what happens after the very first step:

...but next he must remark how the beauty attached to this or that body is cognate to that which is attached to any other, and that if he means to ensue beauty in form, it is gross folly not to regard as one and the same the beauty belonging to all; and so, having grasped this truth, he must make himself a lover of all beautiful bodies, and slacken the stress of his feeling for one by contemning it and counting it a trifle.³⁰

Paradoxically, once the lover understands that physical beauty can be found in many bodies and can't be limited into a single body, the lover starts "transcending" every aspect of corporeal beauty, believing that it has little value, since the beauty of the soul is far more precious compared to the beauty that one can find in a body.³¹ In any case, these first steps are indubitably necessary for this process and that's why Plato knows exactly how (and when) he can underline their importance in his dialogues. The way that Socrates reacts when Alcibiades enters the symposium can be seen to illustrate these first levels of ascension towards the Καλόν, namely those steps that Diotima described as Ἔρως of a particular body (or all beautiful bodies),³² since, as a matter of fact, Plato chooses to present Socrates himself as a lover of the corporeal beauty.³³ We do have to clarify one more time, however, that this corporeal beauty has little value indeed compared to the next steps of the anagoric process, but no one can deny its importance, as it constitutes the initial step towards the mysteries of Ἔρως.

Beautiful bodies and γυμναστική

In the Greek literary tradition, including the Homeric epics and the Pindaric odes, one can easily find a connection between the

³⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, 210b.

³¹ Ibid. 210b.

³² D. A. Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 60.

³³ P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels*, 123.

concept of corporeal beauty and γυμναστική. Athletic exercise relates and contributes actively to the concept of beauty, thus making γυμναστική an activity that profoundly influences Greek aesthetic criteria. The question that emerges is whether Plato tries in any way to redefine those aesthetic criteria. Does he reject them? Is γυμναστική important regarding the notion of beauty? Is a beautiful body connected to the aforementioned *technē* and the athletic exercises that cultivate it? Plato provides a clear answer in the *Sophist*, stating that γυμναστική is the only technique to combat the ugly, αἶσχος.³⁴ It would in fact come as a surprise to discover that Plato rejects wholesale the aesthetic criteria of his era, especially since his philosophical thought is heavily influenced by the concepts of καλοκαγαθία³⁵ and the Dorian ideal.³⁶

Indeed, there is no evidence that Plato rejects the aesthetic criteria of his era regarding the corporeal beauty. We can show how Plato inherits the traditional aesthetic criteria by consideration of Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. Plato presents Socrates as fascinated by the corporeal beauty of Alcibiades; we can thus associate this scene with Diotima's speech regarding the first steps towards the Form of Καλόν that we mentioned above. At this point we have to break down Alcibiades's Platonic portrait. In the dialogue that is named after him, Plato describes him as Ἀλκιβιάδης ὁ καλός,³⁷ adding that his beauty is incontestable.³⁸ In the same dialogue, Socrates poses a question to Alcibiades concerning his education, but the answer of the young Alcibiades disappoints the philosopher as being "unworthy of your looks and your other advantages!"³⁹

I believe that this phrase betrays a certain influence of the theory of καλοκαγαθία upon Platonic thought, in its similarity with

³⁴ Plato, *Sophist*, 228e–229a.

³⁵ Plato, *Laws*, 783d–e; *Charmides*, 154b–e; *Timaeus*, 88d; M. Di Donato, A. Teja, *Agonistica e gimnastica nella Grecia antica* (Rome: Studium, 1989), 192–94, 199.

³⁶ Plato, *Letters*, VII, 336c.

³⁷ Plato, *Alcibiades*, 113b.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 104a.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 119c.

Pindar's phrase: "He was beautiful to look at, and his deeds did not belie his beauty."⁴⁰ In any case, according to Plato, Alcibiades's physical appearance is considered to be impeccable.⁴¹ In his encomium of Socrates in *Symposium*, however, Alcibiades states:

I proposed he should go with me to the trainer's, and I trained with him... So he trained and wrestled with me many a time when no one was there. The same story! I got no further with the affair.⁴²

Why does Plato choose to present such an image? Is it an effort to demonstrate Socrates's self-control? Maybe it is a subtle hint that the first steps associated with corporeal beauty are not that important. Either way, I believe that it cannot be "coincidental" that Plato relates Alcibiades to the *technē* of γυμναστική and physical exercise in a dialogue that focuses on the concept of καλόν. I suggest that Plato cares to show at least to a certain degree the relation between γυμναστική and corporeal beauty. Even if Plato's main purpose in the specific excerpt is to indicate Socrates's σωφροσύνη,⁴³ it doesn't mean that Plato could not promote both ideas in a parallel way.

On the other hand, there is another interesting passage in the same dialogue, in which Diotima tries to define the term ἔρασταί:

...those who resort to him in various other ways—in money-making, an inclination to γυμναστική,⁴⁴ or philosophy—are not described either as loving or as lovers, all those who pursue him seriously in one of his several forms obtain, as loving and as lovers, the name of the whole.⁴⁵

Naturally, Plato could not avoid criticizing those who exaggerate the practice of γυμναστική, clarifying that they do not deserve the title of ἔρασταί, since they show excessive interest in the mentioned art,

⁴⁰ Pindar, *Olympian*, VIII, 19-20.

⁴¹ D. A. Hyland, *Plato and the Question*, 61.

⁴² Plato, *Symposium*, 217b-c.

⁴³ D. A. Hyland, *Plato and the Question*, 62.

⁴⁴ The phrase used in the original text is κατὰ φιλογυμνασίαν.

⁴⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 205d.

searching for real beauty among beautiful bodies, where one can at most find only traces of beauty but never the *Καλόν* itself.

Conclusion

In *Symposium*, Plato lays the foundations for his theory concerning beauty, supporting the idea that the real philosopher can access the Form of *Καλόν* following several anagogical steps. The first steps have a special importance, since they constitute the starting point, in other words, the point of departure, towards the form of *Καλόν*. We have presented this process following the description given by Diotima, shedding light mostly on the first steps of this philosophical ladder due to their connection to corporeal beauty. Obviously, corporeal beauty is not identical to the Form of *Καλόν*. Nevertheless, Plato doesn't underestimate the value of corporal beauty. He may not insist that without these steps that relate to physical beauty, the philosopher is incapable of conceiving the nature of the Idea of *Καλόν*, but he is quite adamant about their contribution to this anagogical process. We can't support the idea that corporal beauty is the only way in which the philosopher can access the Forms and especially the Form of *Καλόν*, but no one can deny its connection to Platonic thought. If that's the case, the role of *γυμναστική* is automatically and directly associated with this process, since the concept of corporal beauty in the Platonic corpus is heavily influenced by the *technē* of exercising the body. Although no one can reduce the matter of beauty to a simple matter of aesthetic criteria in Plato, one can observe that these first steps towards the Form of *Καλόν* relate to the corporal aesthetic, probably influenced by the concept of *καλοκαγαθία* and the Dorian ideal.

